LEBANON 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states there shall be "absolute freedom of conscience" and provides for the free exercise of religious rites for all religious groups provided they do not disturb the public order. The constitution also states there shall be a "just and equitable balance" in the apportionment of cabinet and high-level civil service positions among the major religious groups, a provision amended by the Taif Agreement, which ended the country's civil war and mandated proportional representation between Christians and Muslims in parliament, the cabinet, and other senior government positions.

Some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Baha'is, and unrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. At year's end, the parliament, elected in May, had failed to elect a new president and approve a fully empowered cabinet. Some analysts identified the country's sectarian-based political system for the ongoing political gridlock and economic collapse. Christian and Muslim leaders continued to fear that civil marriage would threaten their ability to administer their own confessional affairs. Couples who wanted a nonreligious ceremony typically travelled to countries where civil marriages are allowed, such as Cyprus.

On June 19, Lebanese authorities, citing the country's 1955 "anti-Israel boycott law," detained and questioned the Maronite Archbishop of Haifa and the Holy Land, Moussa al-Hajj, as he attempted to travel from Israel into the country. Authorities seized medicines, food, and $460,000 in cash donated by Lebanese nationals living in Israel that the archbishop was planning to distribute in Lebanon. Some supporters of the archbishop who are opposed to Hizballah stated that this was an example of the terrorist group using government institutions and security agencies to target the Maronite Church. According to media reports, Minister of Interior Bassam Mawlawi issued an order to the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Directorate of General Security (DGS) on June 24 to ban any "gatherings, events, or meetings promoting homosexuality," stating that his order followed "communications from religious figures rejecting this phenomenon."

Hizballah, a U.S.- designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group, continued to exercise influence over some areas, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut, parts of the Beka'a Valley, and southern areas of the country that are predominantly Shia Muslim. In areas under Hizballah's influence, independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) faced harassment and intimidation, including social, political, and financial pressures. Analysts said Hizballah fears losing its "state-within-a-state privileges" and its ability to maintain arms "beyond the control of the state." The head of Hizballah's parliamentary wing, Muhammad Raad, threatened a renewed civil war if members of parliament (MPs) opposed to Hizballah moved forward with attempts to disarm the group.

In August, media outlets reported that journalist and television host Dima Sadek was the target of a hostile campaign on social media, following her posting of a photograph of the deceased Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini with the caption "The Satanic Verses." In April, a local man attempted to sell a copy of a Torah that he recovered from the ruins of an ancient synagogue in Sidon; the Jewish community filed suit to stop the sale. The NGO Adyan reported that individuals who identified as atheists or agnostics faced restrictions that often compelled them to refrain from expressing their views. In February, a mall located in a predominantly Christian neighborhood in East Beirut dismissed a female employee for wearing a hijab while on the job. On March 13, Christian and Muslim leaders held an interfaith meeting in Tripoli to stress the importance of solidarity between the faiths. Muslim and Christian community leaders said relationships among individual members of different religious groups continued to be amicable.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers engaged government officials to encourage tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious communities and to highlight the importance of combatting violent extremism. The Ambassador spoke with Christian, Shia, Sunni, and Druze religious leaders throughout the year to discuss the impact of the economic situation on different religious communities. Embassy public outreach and assistance programs continued to emphasize tolerance for all religious groups, including through interfaith programs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.3 million (midyear 2022). The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations estimate that the total population includes 4.5 million citizens and 1.5 million refugees fleeing the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. While a majority of refugees are Syrian, the country also hosts a Palestinian refugee population that has been present in the country for more than 70 years. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East estimates there are more than 180,000 Palestinian refugees in the country, in addition to more than 30,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria as of December 2022.

The country has not conducted an official census of its population since 1932. However, Statistics Lebanon, an independent polling and research firm, estimates that 69.3 percent of the citizen population is Muslim (31.2 percent Sunni, 32 percent Shia, and 6.1 percent Alawites and Ismailis combined). Statistics Lebanon further estimates 30.7 percent of the population is Christian. Maronite Catholics are the largest Christian group (with 52.5 percent of the Christian population), followed by Greek Orthodox (25 percent of the Christian population). Other Christian groups include Greek Catholics (Melkites), Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Assyrians, Chaldean Catholics, Copts, Protestants (including Presbyterians, Baptists, and Seventh-day Adventists), Roman (Latin) Catholics, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). According to Statistics Lebanon, 5.5 percent of the population is Druze, concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. There are also small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus. The Jewish Community Council, which represents the country's Jewish community, estimates 70 to 100 Jews reside in the country.

UNHCR reports that the Syrian refugees in the country are mainly Sunni Muslims, but also Shia Muslims, Christians, and Druze. Palestinians live in the country as UN-registered refugees in 12 camps and surrounding areas. They are mostly the descendants of refugees who entered the country in the 1940s and 1950s. Most are Sunni Muslims, but some are Christians.

UNHCR states that, as of June, there are approximately 6,664 UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees in the country. Refugees and foreign migrants from Iraq include Sunni Kurds, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Chaldean Catholics. There are also Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the secretary-general of the

Syriac League, an NGO that advocates for Syriac Christians in the country, approximately 4,000 Iraqi Christians of all denominations and 3,000 to 4,000 Coptic Christians reside in the country. According to the Syriac League, most Iraqi Christian refugees are not registered with UNHCR and so are not included in its count. The Syriac League states that the number of Iraqi Christians living in the country has decreased by 70 percent since 2019, largely because of emigration driven by the country's economic crisis.

Persons from all religious groups continued to emigrate from the country during the year, in large part due to the deteriorating economic situation. There is anecdotal evidence that Christians constituted a significant portion of those who left the country, especially following the August 2020 Beirut Port explosion, with some citing fears for their security and potential treatment in an unpredictable political environment as reasons for their departure.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states there shall be "absolute freedom of conscience" and declares the state will respect all religious groups and denominations, as well as the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious group. The constitution guarantees free exercise of religious rites, provided they do not disturb the public order, and declares the equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference.

By law, an individual is free to convert to a different religion if a local senior official of the religious group the person wishes to join approves the change. The religious group issues a document confirming the convert's new religion, allowing the convert to register her or his new religion with the Ministry of Interior's (MOI's) Personal Status Directorate. The new religion is included thereafter on government-issued civil registration documents.

Citizens have the right to remove the customary notation of their religion from government-issued civil registration documents or change how it is listed. Changing these documents does not require approval of religious officials and

does not change or remove the individual's registration with the Personal Status Directorate.

The penal code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of "blaspheming God publicly." It does not provide a definition of what this entails. A publications law regulates print media and includes provisions that impose potential fines or prison terms for sectarian provocation and prohibit the press from publishing blasphemous content regarding the country's officially recognized religions or content that may provoke sectarian feuds.

The law governing audiovisual media bans live broadcasts of certain religious events and prohibits the broadcast of programs that seek to harm public morals, ignite sectarian strife, or insult religious beliefs. Websites are censored through court orders filed with the ISF's Cybercrimes Bureau for further investigation, after which the bureau issues a final order to the Ministry of Telecommunications. Elements of the law permit censorship of religious material considered a threat to national security or offensive to the dignity of the head of state or foreign leaders. The law includes guidelines regarding materials deemed unsuitable for publication in a book, newspaper, or magazine. Any violation of the guidelines may result in the author's imprisonment or a fine. Officials from any of the recognized religious groups may request that the DGS ban a book. The government may prosecute offending journalists and publications in the publications court. Authorities occasionally also refer such cases to criminal courts, a process not established in law.

The penal code criminalizes defamation and contempt for religion and stipulates a maximum prison term of three years for either of these offenses.

By law, religious groups may apply to the government for official recognition. To do so, a religious group must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles to the cabinet, which evaluates whether the group's principles are in accordance with the government's perception of popular values and the constitution. Alternatively, an unrecognized religious group may apply for recognition by seeking affiliation with another recognized religious group. In doing so, the unrecognized group does not gain recognition as a separate group but becomes an affiliate of the group through which it applies. This process has the same requirements as applying for recognition directly with the government.

There are 18 officially recognized religious groups: five Muslim groups (Shia, Sunni, Druze, Alawite, and Ismaili), 12 Christian groups (Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrian, Chaldean, Copt, evangelical Protestant, and Roman Catholic), and Jews. Religious groups not recognized by the government include Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, several Protestant groups, and the Church of Jesus Christ.

Official recognition of a religious group allows baptisms and marriages performed by the group to receive government recognition, which also conveys other benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religious group's codes to personal status matters. By law, the government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own rules on family and personal status issues, including marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Shia, Sunni, Druze, and recognized Christian groups have state-appointed, government-subsidized sectarian courts to administer family and personal status law according to the respective religious group's beliefs. While the religious courts and religious laws are legally bound to comply with the provisions of the constitution, the Court of Cassation (the highest civil court in the judicial system) has very limited oversight of religious court proceedings and decisions.

There are no formalized procedures for civil marriage or divorce. The government recognizes heterosexual civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country irrespective of the religious affiliation of each partner in the marriage. While some Christian and Muslim religious authorities will perform interreligious marriages, clerics, priests, or religious courts often require the nonbelonging partner to pledge to raise his or her children in the religion of the partner and/or to relinquish certain rights, such as inheritance or custody claims, in the case of divorce.

Unrecognized religious groups may own property, assemble for worship, and perform religious rites freely. They may not perform legally recognized marriage or divorce proceedings, and they have no standing to determine inheritance issues. Due to agreements in the country's confessional system that designate percentages of senior government positions (and in some cases, specific positions) for the recognized religious confessions, members of unrecognized

groups have no opportunity to occupy certain government positions, including cabinet, parliamentary, secretary-general, and director general positions.

The government requires Protestant churches to register with the Evangelical Synod, a self-governing advisory group that oversees religious matters for Protestant congregations and representing those churches to the government.

According to the constitution, recognized religious communities may operate their own schools. However, religious schools must follow the same general rules as public schools, which stipulate that they must not incite sectarian discord or threaten national security. The government permits but does not require religious education in public schools. Both Christian and Muslim local religious representatives sometimes host educational sessions in public schools.

The constitution states "sectarian groups" shall be represented in a "just and equitable balance" in the cabinet and high-level civil service positions, which includes the ministry ranks of secretary-general and director general. It also states these posts shall be distributed proportionately among the major religious groups. This distribution of positions among religious groups is based on the unwritten 1943 National Pact, which used religious affiliation data from the 1932 census (the last conducted in the country). According to the pact, the president shall be a Maronite Christian, the speaker of parliament shall be a Shia Muslim, and the prime minister shall be a Sunni Muslim. This proportional distribution also applies to high-level positions in the civil service, the judiciary, military, and security institutions, and public agencies at both the national and local levels of government. Parliament is elected on equal representation between Christians and Muslims, and cabinet positions must be allocated on the same basis. Druze and Alawites are included in this allocation within Muslim communities. With the exception of Ismaili Islam and Judaism, authorities allocated every government-recognized religious group at least one seat in parliament regardless of the number of its adherents.

The constitution also states there is no legitimacy for any authorities that contradict the "pact of communal existence," thereby giving force of law to the unwritten 1943 National Pact, although that arrangement is neither officially spelled out in the constitution nor is it a formally binding legal agreement.

The Taif Agreement, which ended the country's 15-year civil war in 1989, also mandates elections based on the principle of proportional representation between Muslims and Christians in the Lebanese Parliament but reaffirms the Christian and Muslim allocation at 50 percent each. The agreement reduced the constitutional powers of the Maronite Christian presidency and increased those of the Sunni Muslim prime minister while also subjecting the designation of the prime minister to binding consultations with parliament and the designations of all ministers to a parliamentary vote of confidence. The Taif Agreement also endorses the constitutional provision appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation, including senior positions within the military and other security forces. Customarily, a Christian commands the armed forces, while the directors general of the ISF and the DGS are Sunni and Shia, respectively. Several other top positions in the security services are customarily designated for particular confessions as well. While specific positions are designated by custom rather than law, deviating from custom is rare and any change or accommodation generally must be mutually agreed upon by the confessions concerned. The Taif Agreement's stipulations on equality of representation among members of different confessions do not apply to citizens who do not list a religious affiliation on their national registration, and thus they cannot hold a seat designated for a specific confession.

By law, the synod of each Christian group elects its patriarch, the Sunni and Shia electoral bodies elect their respective senior clerics, and the Druze community elects its Sheikh al-Aql, its most senior religious leader. The cabinet must endorse the nomination of Sunni and Shia muftis, as well as the Sheikh al-Aql, and pay their salaries. The government also appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze clerical judges. By law, the government does not endorse Christian patriarchs and does not pay the salaries of Christian clergy and officials of Christian groups.

The government issues foreign religious workers a one-month visa; to stay longer, a worker must complete a residency application during the month. Religious workers also must sign a "commitment of responsibility" form before receiving a visa, which subjects the worker to legal prosecution and immediate deportation for any activity involving religious or other criticism directed against the state or any other country, except Israel. If the government finds an individual engaging in

religious activity while on a tourist visa, the government may determine a violation of the visa category has occurred and deport the individual.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On June 19, Lebanese authorities detained and questioned the Maronite Archbishop of Haifa and the Holy Land, Moussa al-Hajj, as he attempted to travel from Israel into Lebanon. Lebanese authorities seized from al-Hajj medicines, food, and $460,000 in cash donated by Lebanese nationals living in Israel that he planned to distribute to Lebanese citizens in Lebanon, according to media reports. Although authorities released al-Hajj after several hours of questioning, they did not return the seized money or goods, citing the 1955 "anti-Israel boycott law."

Some Christians viewed the al-Hajj incident as an impingement upon their religious freedoms. On July 20, the Maronite Patriarchal Council, made up of four Maronite bishops, stated that the incident was an "unfortunate and reprehensible attack" on Archbishop al-Hajj that "brought us back to the times of occupation and rulers in the previous centuries, when the invaders and occupiers were trying to undermine the role of the Maronite Church in Lebanon and the East and its brotherhood between religions." The bishops said that the confiscated aid should be returned "so that it can reach its beneficiaries." In a July 24 sermon, Maronite Patriarch al-Rai denounced the legal proceedings against al-Hajj as a fabrication, arguing that the money was for charity. He demanded that the charges be dropped and that the military judge who presides over the case resign. The congregation responded with a standing ovation.

The judge overseeing the al-Hajj case said that the money he was carrying came from individuals in Israel, "the majority of whom work for the enemy," and he also stated, "I respect the church, but there is a law, which is the boycott of Israel law, and it is my duty as a judge to enforce it." Hizballah officials saw al-Hajj's act as normalization with Israel and accused him of delivering money from Lebanese affiliated with the South Lebanese Army (SLA). According to the Religion News Service (RNS), many Lebanese associated with the Israeli-backed SLA moved to northern Israel after Israel ended its occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000, and Hizballah's opponents say the group has used government institutions and

security agencies to target the Maronite Church. Most Christian MPs and those of other religious groups who opposed Hizballah expressed support for the archbishop and the Maronite Church. Leading Druze politician Walid Jumblatt called for calm but said, "We reject the Israeli exploitation of the position of clerics in an attempt to smuggle money for political ends."

According to media reports, Minister of Interior Bassam Mawlawi issued an order on June 24 to the ISF and the DGS to ban any "gatherings, events, or meetings promoting homosexuality," stating that his order followed "communications from religious figures rejecting this phenomenon." According to the NGO Human Rights Watch, Mawlawi's order cited no legal basis for his decision but said that such gatherings violate "customs and traditions" and "principles of religion." On the same day, a group that referred to themselves as the "Soldiers of God" ripped down a floral rainbow display erected for the pride celebration in Achrafieh, linking lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex rights with the decay in traditional values and religious rights. Prior to the decision, Grand Mufti of the Republic Abdel Latif Deryan announced that Sunni clerics would allow neither the legalization of homosexuality nor the passage of a civil marriage law. Shia Mufti Jaafari Sheikh Ahmad Qabalan also issued a statement strongly rejecting what he referred to as a "human anomaly" and saying he would never accept the legalization of homosexuality. On November 16, the State Shura Council, the judicial body that hears cases to which the state or public administration itself is a party, temporarily suspended Mawlawi's directive. The State Shura Council's ruling came in response to a lawsuit filed by NGOs. The State Shura Council's General Assembly will review the order at a date yet to be determined. The Supreme Shia Islamic Council stated that the Shura Council's decision was "wrong and even erroneous," and it called Mawlawi's act a "brave step that should be emulated."

The DGS reviewed all films and plays released in the country during the year. On July 8, it banned Universal Pictures' Minions: The Rise of Gru from screening in movie theaters because of its depiction of an evil nun character. Civil society activists stated that the DGS's decision-making process lacked transparency and that it was influenced by the opinions of religious institutions and political groups.

Investigations continued into the 2021 clashes in the Beirut neighborhood of Tayyouneh between Shia members of Hizballah, the Amal Movement, and

Christian supporters of the Lebanese Forces party. Seven individuals died in the confrontation and more than 30 were wounded.

According to local NGOs, some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Baha'is and members of unrecognized Protestant faiths, continued to list themselves as belonging to recognized religious groups in government records to ensure their marriage and other personal status documents remained legally valid. Many Baha'is said they chose to list themselves as Shia Muslims in order to effectively manage civil matters officially administered by Shia institutions, while members of the Church of Jesus Christ said they registered as evangelical Protestants.

The government again failed to approve a request from the Jewish community to change its official name to the Jewish Community Council from the Israelite Communal Council (the group's officially recognized name). Jewish community representatives reported that the MOI continued to delay the verification of the results of the Jewish Community Council's election of members, which occurs every six years, most recently in 2020. Regulations governing such councils require the MOI to verify council election results. The council, which represents the interests of the country's Jewish citizens, repeatedly submitted requests to change its government-appointed name to reduce social stigma, to no avail. The council blamed its official name in part for the difficulties it experienced with renewals every six years. In late 2021, the Minister of Interior said the MOI would investigate allegations that several council members forged the signatures of nonresident Lebanese Jews to illegally acquire property. As of year's end, the MOI had not referred the case to the judiciary.

The Jewish community faced difficulties importing material for religious rites; customs agents were reportedly wary of allowing imports of any origin containing Hebrew script due to a national ban on trade of Israeli goods. During the year, the Jewish Community Council faced difficulty in renewing the mandate of its members, a legal requirement for groups that wish to continue to be recognized by the government. This was due to government officials' unwillingness to put their signatures on any document with the group's name on it, since doing so could be misinterpreted as tacit support for Israel.

During May 15 parliamentary elections, the Shia-dominated Hizballah and Amal parties won the 27 seats allocated for Shia. The government led by Sunni Prime Minister Mikati went into caretaker status after the elections, and Mikati had been unable to form a new government before the end of Maronite President Michel Aoun's term. Voters elected one parliamentarian (a Syriac Orthodox Christian) to represent the Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrian, Chaldeans, Latin, and Coptic minorities in the May 15 elections. Aoun completed his six-year term on October 31, but at year's end, the parliament had not elected a successor. A caretaker cabinet consisted of 24 ministers: five Maronite, five Shia, five Sunni, three Greek Orthodox, two Druze, two Greek Catholic, one Christian minorities, and one Armenian Orthodox.

Members of all confessions may serve in the military, intelligence, and security services. While most confessions had members serving in these capacities, some religious groups did not, usually because of their small number of adherents in the country. Members of the largest recognized confessions dominated the ranks of senior positions.

During the election campaign, many of the country's senior religious leaders urged voters to cast ballots in the upcoming election.

During the year, religious leaders spoke out on issues of national concern. The Grand Mufti of the Sunni community expressed concern that the incumbent president might not leave office at the time mandated by the constitution. The Maronite Patriarch called on political leaders to create the appropriate atmosphere to elect a president and form a new government. The Metropolitan Bishop of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch for the Archdiocese of Beirut called on the parliament to elect a new president without delay.

During the year, some analysts identified the country's confessionally based politics for its continuing political gridlock and inability to rectify the ongoing economic collapse. In May, following the elections, a U.S. Institute of Peace analyst wrote, "Modern Lebanon is built on a governance model in which sectarian leaders act as the link between communities and the state, with political elites competing over state resources to provide services and benefits to a narrow sectarian support base. This model allowed for a sect-based, corrupt patronage system to take hold of the state." In September, a scholar with the Carnegie

Endowment stated that national politics is built on "a delicate sectarian balance," internal and sometimes shifting dynamics within the country's various religious and political groups, and changes in the regional balance of powers. He concluded that "tensions between various religious sects remain the greatest obstacle hampering reform efforts," and that, "In the absence of a strong centralized government, sectarian forces [have] rushed to fill the vacuum left by the state by providing social, financial, and health services, while also restoring and dominating the sectarian discourse they revived after the demonstrations."

Christian and Muslim leaders continued to fear that allowing civil marriages would threaten their ability to administer their own confessional affairs. According to the online news site Al-Monitor, "Secular and feminist movements have highlighted the importance of civil marriage as the door to a personal status law."

Persons who wanted a nonreligious marriage ceremony typically travelled to countries that allow civil marriages, such as Cyprus. Media reported that the country's current economic situation and the backlog of passport applications with the government made overseas travel more difficult. Some couples unable to travel resorted to virtual civil weddings officiated through the internet. Media outlets reported on the July 10 marriage of Omar Abdel Baki, who is Druze, and Najwa Sbeity, who is Shia. While their wedding physically took place in Lebanon, a nondenominational minister officiated the ceremony virtually from Utah. According to the Economist, the minister has conducted over two dozen virtual weddings for Lebanese couples. There was no information available on whether the MOI recognized the marriage as valid. The MOI took no action on the 30 or more cases of civil marriage that have awaited registration with the ministry since 2013.

When Sunni MPs Halime Kaakour, Ibrahim Mneimne, and Waddah Sadek spoke in favor of civil marriage soon after being elected to parliament in May, they were verbally harassed by prominent Sunni clerics, including Hassan Merheb, deputy inspector general of Dar al-Fatwa, the highest Sunni authority in the country, who accused them of not representing Sunni interests, according to media reports. Kaakour then stated that religious leaders incited threats of physical violence against her because of her stand on civil marriage. Al-Monitor reported that draft laws legalizing civil marriage have been submitted in the parliament since 1998, but all have failed to pass. One attorney and university professor said that the

country's current approach to civil marriage was "an absurdity" and undermined the country's sovereignty.

On July 2, a judge in a civil court in the city of Nabatieh issued a decision that temporarily gave custody of the one-month-old infant of a divorced Muslim couple to the mother so that she could breastfeed the baby. The judge issued the order in light of nonaction by sharia courts to reportedly save the life of the child, who was in the custody of her father. Media reports interpreted this judicial intervention by a civil court as a minor victory in the ongoing debate about religious jurisdiction over personal status issues in the country.

After a complaint by the Dar al-Fatwa on February 5, the DGS arrested Nashat Munther, a self-proclaimed prophet of God, on February 2. DGS charged Munther, who referred to himself as the "Prophet Nashat Majd Noor," with falsely claiming to be a prophet, threatening journalists, and insulting the state of Egypt.

From January 31 through February 4, the Holy See's Secretary for Relations with the States, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, visited the country and met with the President, the Prime Minister, and the Speaker of Parliament. He also met with Catholic and Orthodox bishops, as well as the heads of the Sunni, Shia, and Druze religious communities, emphasizing the importance of promoting the political and economic stability of the country, providing opportunities for youth, and protecting the country's unique character of religious pluralism and coexistence.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Hizballah, a U.S.- designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group, continued to exercise influence over some areas, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut, the Beka'a Valley, and southern areas of the country, all of which are predominantly Shia. In those areas, Hizballah provided several basic services, such as gas, diesel, health care, education, food aid, infrastructure repair, and internal security. There continued to be reports of Hizballah controlling access to the neighborhoods and localities under its influence, including in Beirut's southern suburbs and areas of the Beka'a Valley and South Lebanon.

In areas under Hizballah's influence, independent NGOs faced harassment and intimidation, including social, political, and financial pressures. In a May 7 interview with Al-Arabiya television, the Sunni Mufti of Mount Lebanon, Muhammad al-Jozo, said, "Hizballah wants to impose its control over the Lebanese scene in order to implement an Iranian enterprise, which would take the entire region, not just Lebanon, backwards, towards a pointless conflict between classes, sects, and religious denominations. This conflict has nothing to do with Islam. It is mere fitna [sectarian strife], which leads to the wholesale killing of people and sends us back decades." He added, "The existence of Hizballah has become an obstacle in Lebanon's path towards democracy and freedom. This has caused everything that we witness in Lebanon – the decay, the weakness, the bankruptcy, the poverty, the hunger, the disturbances, the problems… All of these are the result of the so-called Hizballah phenomenon."

Following the May 15 parliamentary election results, Geopolitical Intelligence Services, a European think tank, posted an analysis by scholar Amatzia Baram in Jul, that stated that Hizballah "fears losing its state-within-a-state privileges." Baram cited the organization's "unregulated communication systems and financial institutions, as well as unofficial private border crossings that undermine state sovereignty." The report also predicted that Hizballah's "veto power also may end over legal investigations into responsibility for the 2020 Beirut port explosion that killed nearly 200 persons. Hizballah's leaders, with Iran's support, are therefore already resorting to threats. … Any attempt to limit, let alone eliminate Hizballah's privileges is immediately presented as high treason in Israel's service." The head of Hizballah's parliamentary wing, Muhammad Raad, threatened a renewed civil war if MPs opposed to Hizballah moved forward with attempts to disarm the group. Sami Attallah, the founding director of the Policy Initiative, a Lebanese think tank, told the New York Times in May that the loss of a parliamentary majority by Hizballah and its allies would not affect the status of the group's weapons, noting that Hizaballah's arms are, according to the Times report, "beyond the control of the state."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On August 13, journalist and television host Dima Sadek was the target of a hostile campaign on social media, following her posting of a photograph of the deceased Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and Ayatollah

Ruhollah Khomeini with the caption "The Satanic Verses." Sadek, who posted the image in reaction to an August 12 attack on British writer Salman Rushdie in New York State, stated in her tweet, "I am the subject of a public incitement-to-murder campaign launched by Jawad Nasrallah," the son of Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. Sadek accompanied her message with a screenshot of a tweet from another internet user that said, "Spilling Dima Sadek's blood is a moral obligation." The Beirut-based SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom denounced the campaign of "incitement and threat for murder and rape."

In April, a local man attempted to sell a copy of a Torah that he recovered from the ruins of an ancient synagogue in Sidon. The Jewish community filed suit to stop the sale, arguing that the Torah scroll, damaged after years of storage inside the wall of the synagogue, should be disposed of according to Jewish religious tradition. At year's end, the case had not yet gone to court and remained unresolved. Authorities believed that the man who had attempted to sell the Torah had fled the country.

The Jewish Community Council's 2011 lawsuit against individuals who constructed buildings in the Jewish cemetery in Tripoli continued, pending additional analysis of the site initially ordered by a court in 2017. The lawsuit remained unresolved at year's end.

At year's end, approximately 70 percent of students, not including those from the refugee population, attended private schools, the majority of which were tied to religious organizations. These included schools that the government subsidized. The schools generally continued to accommodate students from other religious and minority groups.

According to NGOs, some refugee children and the children of foreign domestic workers faced obstacles to equal treatment under the law. They reported discrimination that included bullying linked to race, skin color, religion, and nationality. Some of the children, however, were able to attend public schools.

According to an online survey conducted by the Beirut-based Adyan Foundation, 66 percent of participants stated they had a good understanding of the concepts of human rights and freedom of religious belief. However, 56 percent of the respondents also said that human rights and freedom of religious belief were

Western concepts they felt were irrelevant to life in their local communities. The foundation reported that individuals who identified as atheists or agnostics faced restrictions that often compelled them not to express their views.

During their annual synod meeting held in Beirut on June 20-25, Syriac Catholic bishops discussed the economic difficulties facing the Syriac Catholic community, tying these difficulties, along with political and security challenges, to the continuing emigration of members of their community from Lebanon and other countries in the region.

In February, a mall located in a predominantly Christian neighborhood in East Beirut dismissed a female employee for wearing a hijab while on the job. The employee announced her dismissal on social media, claiming religious discrimination on the part of her former employer. In a statement, the mall operator responded that its policy prohibited public displays of religious symbols.

On March 13, media outlets reported that Christian and Muslim leaders held an interfaith meeting in Tripoli to stress the importance of solidarity. The Lebanese Society for the Good of You and Me organized a meeting in Tripoli for prominent Christian and Muslim figures. Chair Jasmin Qamrawi stressed that interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians was not an option but a necessity and called for strengthening the relationships between the religious communities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to engage government officials on the need to encourage tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect among religious groups. The Ambassador met on multiple occasions throughout the year with the leadership of the Sunni, Shia, Druze, and Christian communities to promote interfaith dialogue and urge them to take steps to counter violent extremism related to religious belief. During these meetings, the Ambassador discussed the welfare of religious communities and protecting religious freedom. Embassy officers often met with civil society representatives to convey similar messages.

During the year, the embassy continued to raise with the MOI the delays that the Jewish Community Council faced on the confirmation of its registration. The

embassy amplified messages of religious tolerance through its social media accounts.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers frequently met with individual politicians representing different religious groups to discuss their views, including on relations with other religious groups, and to promote religious tolerance.

During the year, the embassy selected four undergraduate college students to study in the United States through an exchange program intended to expose participants to religious pluralism in the United States, including visits to diverse houses of worship and attendance at a variety of related cultural activities.